

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AMONG INDIGENOUS EVANGELICALS IN ECUADOR

A perspective of the last two decades

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Introduction

I am grateful for the invitation from CETELA to share at this time the situation regarding theological education among indigenous evangelicals in Ecuador, the country where I have been serving for ten years, along with my wife Patricia Urueña, in theological education, especially through churches and indigenous communities.

That which I am going to share is a very personal perspective of how theological education has been and is being given among indigenous evangelicals in the past two decades. To this end I will focus on the following aspects: 1) antecedents, 2) methodology, 3) dimensions, 4) characteristics, and 5) results. Finally, along with conclusions, I will mention certain challenges, recognizing that each of these aspects deserve to be delved into more deeply at a later time.

That which I present are ideas and reflections taken from meetings and dialogues with pastors, students, teachers, and indigenous communities during these ten years, as well as the little writings about this topic. I hope that what I share will serve to generate a profitable dialogue.

1. Antecedents

1.1 The arrival of evangelical missions: Theological education in Ecuador coincides with the arrival of missions towards the end of the 19th century. Once they installed themselves and had converts, they began to create biblical institutes with the plan being to form the first pastors and church leaders, a work which continued with the passing of time. Nevertheless, in the 1950's a more organized and systematic way of theological education began.

Along with achieving changes in habits in the lives of indigenous people – particularly among men – such as alcohol and tobacco, that which allowed them to improve their quality of life in their families, they also assimilated fundamentalist doctrinal concepts of Christian life, imparted by North American missionaries from different denominational backgrounds, which produced isolation from political life.

The majority of indigenous evangelical churches were established by the Gospel Missionary Union (GMU) with the support of other missions such as HCJB and the Summer Linguistic Institute (ILV). These established churches, the majority of them evangelical, did not belong to legally or administratively to the GMU.

1.2 Doctrinal instruction: The transference of evangelical faith was done in the biblical institutes, initiated in 1953, and whose objective was the reproduction of dogmas and doctrines in the missions, as well as the teaching of church administration. Presently the institutes are in Quichua hands, but under the mentoring of North American missionaries.

In the 1970's stories and teaching books about the life of Jesus, evangelical hymns, modules for of Bible course through extension, and teaching materials regarding evangelical doctrine (booklets regarding church history, Old Testament, New Testament, pastoral letters, and Bible studies, for example) had been published in indigenous languages. Music institutes were also created to teach people how to play instruments, sing, and compose hymns.

In 1985 a pedagogy institute was initiated to train religious teachers for the transmission of evangelical doctrine to the children in churches.

The content of doctrinal instruction can be summed up in the following way: 1) Bible studies placed emphasis on memorization and literal interpretation. 2) Dogmatic topics of eschatological and messianic content. 3) Moralistic evangelical ethics. 4) Procedures for liturgical celebrations. 5) Program divisions according to gender: some for men and the others for women. 6) Affirmation and defense of pastoral ministry exclusively for men, a teaching sustained in an androcentric and patriarchal interpretation of the Bible. 7) There are no academic requirements to enter the programs, just a calling from God.

The implicit ideology in these contents were, and still are, promoted and controlled by Radio Colta (created in 1931) and the Voice of the AIIIECH (Association of Evangelical Indigenous Churches of Chimborazo), whose wavelengths are transmitted to evangelical indigenous communities within its reach.

1.3 Paradigm changes: Being such, theological education among indigenous evangelicals was developed, up through the end of the 1980's, under paradigms with an emphasis in fundamentalist doctrines and fundamentalism itself. But beginning in the 1990's other paradigms began to be present in theological education through two institutions: FEINE (created as the Ecuadorian Federation of Indigenous Evangelicals, and is today the Council of Indigenous Evangelical Peoples and Organizations of Ecuador), and FUIDE (Indigenous Foundation for Development).

FEINE rose up in the early 1980's with indigenous evangelical church associations from different regions of the country, with not just religious purposes but also social purposes, in the moment of agrarian reforms and reclaiming lands, with many of these associations headed up by the Roman Catholic bishop Leonidas Proaño.

In the beginning of the 1990's FEINE had entered into the national political scene and, at the same time, invited the Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM)¹ to support the program in biblical and theological training, since more than half of the 2,800 indigenous churches in the country did not have either trained pastors or church leaders. A result of this invitation was the establishment of an agreement in 1993 between AIIECH, an arm of FEINE in this province, with the MBM (which is today the Mennonite Mission Network (MMN)) and the Latin American Biblical Seminary (SBL) (which today is the Latin American Biblical University (UBL)). Thus the Indigenous Center of Theological Studies (CIET) was born, whose headquarters is in Riobamba, and is an institution charged with developing academic programs of theology and ministry, inspired by liberation theology. It enrolled nearly 200 students.

Nevertheless, in 1997 the new board of AIIECH, who were more fundamentalist, did not recognize the center and, in agreement with the leaders of CIET, stopped the intention of articulating academic formation of religious leaders and the development of an indigenous theology, labelling the contents of the courses as liberation theology. In spite of everything the UBL and the MMN maintained their support of CIET. In this period (1993-1997), and afterwards, various indigenous evangelicals in Chimborazo were able to advance in their theological training in Ecuador, and others under scholarship went to the UBL in Costa Rica. As a result of this theological training some students created FUIDE with various programs: one of theological training (created into a satellite of the UBL), a scholarship program, and, a little later, a project assessment program. Indigenous evangelicals who entered into the UBL were converted immediately into teaching resources in the theological education program at a university level.²

Even though the process with AIIECH was broken, the strength of theological education continued through the Pastors' Council of FEINE, who, along with FUIDE, received the support of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), the MMN, and the UBL, training in a direct way in an intermediate level more than 100 pastors and leaders, men and women, and graduated 60 of them during 2001-2005. At the same time, FUIDE opened a new university level center of the UBL in Quito, having its headquarters in the Methodist Church and having 20 students from different denominations,³ five indigenous students included,⁴ one of whom finished her Bachelor's Degree in Theology in Costa Rica.⁵

Afterwards the Pastors' Council of FEINE established an agreement with CLAI and MMN, and another with the UBL, training more than 140 pastors and indigenous leaders during 2007-2009. The graduation of these, most being in intermediate and beginner levels, was carried out in November 2009.

As we can see, paradigm changes in theological education was carried out in conjunction with the efforts of entities, some of whose perspective was liberal and other liberationist, along with FEINE and FUIDE, whose leaders had the openness to this change in theological perception.

2. Developed methodology

In this process of theological education started in the 1990's it is necessary to point out that, even though at the beginning a great interest in the university program was awakened, the level of education of

¹ The main reason to invite the Mennonite Board of Missions was because of the support of this mission organization to indigenous or native communities in various parts of the world. The most represented, besides Ecuador, have been in the Ivory Coast and the Argentinean Chaco where for more than 50 years native methodologies of accompaniment have been developed in Bible training to indigenous churches without seeking to proselytize.

² These were Julián Guamán, Gerónimo Yantalema, and Margarita de la Torre.

³ The students belonged to the Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, and Methodist Churches, the Salvation Army, and various indigenous churches.

⁴ Two of them are leaders in FEINE, Willian and Rafael Chela.

⁵ This student was Blanca Viracocha, a youth leader with the Methodist Church in the Pastocalle Township, in Cotopaxi province, and belonged to the Romerillos community.

indigenous people did not allow a significant number of students. Because of this greater attention has been given to beginner and intermediate levels.

The intermediate level has followed the 24 modules of CEPA (Pastoral Education Course) of the UBL, whose methodology consists in following outline: look, play, act (and celebrate). In spite of the practicality of these modules, and after several years of use, it was recognized, among the same indigenous peoples, that it was not the most appropriate method for them, given their levels of education and their way of processing concepts. Nevertheless, the teachers of the intermediate level continue to use the modules as a guide and adapt them in their meetings which facilitates interactive learning.

Regarding the former, the Pastors' Council of FEINE thought that it was necessary to develop a biblical-theological-pastoral training program at the beginner level, taking into account a methodology and contents that promote the same indigenous evangelical peoples to go from "objects to subjects of theology."

The beginner's level program, initiated in 2007, consists of four workshops per year, three courses per workshop, for a total of 12, which have been constructed in six events in a Latin American theological perspective. In the first event a series of workshops with 20 pastors and leaders was held, having entered into the program, regarding the national reality, transforming education, indigenous cosmovision, and the creation of popular appropriate material according to the context. In the second, a diagnostic was developed about important topics to deal with, define its content and its transversal ideas, among those being gender equity. In the third, appropriate content and methodology was defined for each topic. In the fourth, Biblical, theological, and pastoral foundations were proposed. In the fifth event, booklets were created for each one of the 12 topics chosen as urgent and necessary. The sixth event was the evaluation after the first year, which produced feedback in some of the content and applied methodologies.

The 12 booklets that were created are: 1) conflict resolution from a biblical perspective; 2) church administration for the 21st century; 3) accounting in the church; 4) community pastoral accompaniment; 5) celebrate a service to the God of Life; 6) communication of the Word of God to the community; 7) announcing the Kingdom of God; 8) contextualized Christian education; 9) the reasons for our faith; 10) reading the Bible with different eyes; 11) Jesus as the model of a leader; and 12) the Church and social development. There are other booklets in the process of being put together with suggested topics from the same churches and communities, for example: church-state relations, Church and State, gender equality, national reality, and indigenous cosmovision.

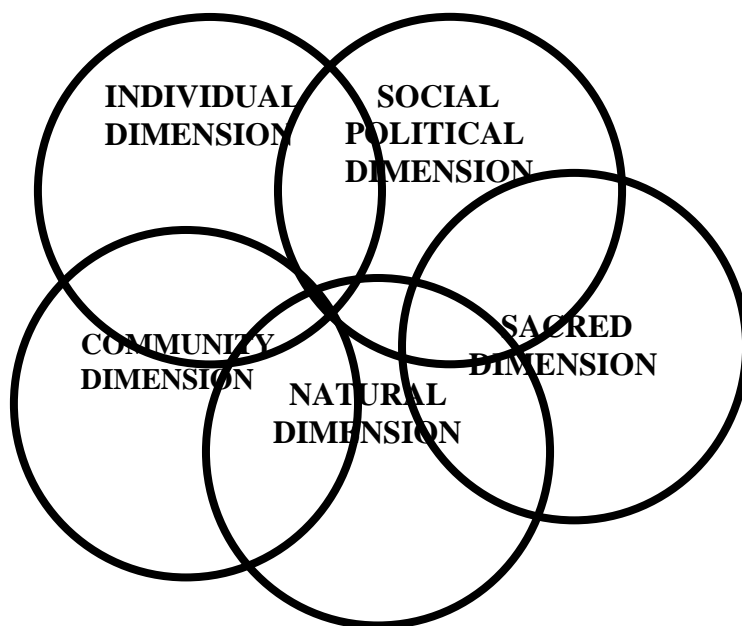
During the creation of these booklets, and the implementation of the program, indigenous pastors and leaders, men and women, from different provinces on the national level, have played an active and decisive role in each stage. They have carried out the diagnostic taking into account the own needs of the churches and communities, they have chosen the most urgent and necessary topics, they have identified methodologies from their own culture, they have chosen pertinent biblical texts to illuminate each situation from their reality, they have shared their own experiences from their rural and/or urban context, they have identified an appropriate process to the students in each one of the topics, and they have been facilitators in the majority of the courses.

The workshop participants have expressed their appreciation because the program has helped them read the Bible with different eyes, to think about a pastoral work starting from their context of poverty, exclusion, and marginalization, and it has encouraged them to be instruments of transformation and liberation.

3. Dimensions of theological education

On reviewing the experience of theological education among indigenous evangelicals in the last two decades in Ecuador, under the distinct to the traditional paradigms, one can identify, from the experience, the following dimensions,⁶ illustrated in the following graphic:

⁶ This proposal is inspired by the correlation method of Paul Tillich in *Systematic Theology* (1967).



3.1 The sacred dimension: It is evidenced in the conception of God the creator as a motor of the universe and revealed through the Bible, human beings, Christ, the church, nature, and the events of everyday life. Indigenous communities are profoundly religious, and this aspect circulates in all areas of life, from the individual to the social-political and including the present and the future, life here and that which is beyond. All that happens around them is explained with reference to the supernatural. Even though everything is integrated in the spiritual, a separation between the sacred and the profane is observed.

3.2 The social-political dimension: It is evidenced in their concerns and involvement in the proposals of social and political transformation of the country or the community where they are found. Political life is tightly related to life, and it is seen as the will and revelation of God for history.

3.3 The natural dimension: It is evidenced in two aspects: on one side in the profound respect and care for creation, in their methods of cultivation, and in the affectionate treatment of animals. It is not conceived of in theological education without conceiving the earth as mother, as “Pacha Mama,” because she is who gives live, food, drink, and clothes. She is part of my life, my life is part of her. There is a link; from her we came, we are part of her, and to her we will return (Gen. 3:19). On the other had, the natural dimension is evidenced in the relationship with the environment, with the surroundings: water (which is like Pacha Mama’s blood), vegetation, mountains, sun, moon, stars, all are part of the cycle of each human being.

3.4 The individual dimension: It is evidenced in their practices – even – moralists but also ethical – as discernment processes – which help them judge their lifestyle. Here enters the triple prohibition: *Ama shua* (do not steal), *Ama quilla* (do not be lazy), and *Ama llulla* (do not lie). And when at least one of these is spoken it is because they are failing as a community. But this individual dimension is recognized as a particular form of achieving communication and a message of what nature or God can transmit. It is evidenced in a unique relationship of each individual with the creator. *Shamanes* or *yachais* (wise men) are recognized in the midst of the community as people with special qualities to deeply relate with God and spiritual forces.

3.5 The community dimension: It is evidenced in its sharing and concern for he or she who is one’s neighbor, companion, sibling, friend. This includes the community of faith just as the birth community or county. The community is the extension of the family. Mother earth exists in the function of the community, and the community is fulfilled in relation to the earth. Concerning the earth community work days are organized around planting and harvest. What is more, a cosmovision of reciprocity exists which is connected to the future, more than to the present or a person or a specific community, characterized by giving from what one has, and not from what is leftover, with joy.

The dimensions which we have presented are intrinsic to indigenous cosmovision and indigenous spirituality. As we realize the being is tightly interrelated with the sacred, with the social-political, with

nature, and with the community, including the ecclesial, to which it belongs. As such, theological education should be carried out recognizing the interrelation which exists between them. In other words, theological education is converted into a holistic process. From there the trainer acquires the importance of all this, because he or she should live out the previous dimensions in order to not just be accepted as he or she is by the students or communities, but rather as models to follow. That is, the teacher should not just be someone with academic knowledge, but someone with a life which integrates the five dimensions. Because of this, it is difficult that we westerners be the best people for this process. It is better that the teachers are the same indigenous peoples, who integrate these dimensions in their cosmovision, who should be carrying this out.

4. Characteristics of the processes of theological education

In continuation I will highlight certain characteristics of these new theological formation processes in Ecuador during the 1990's and the first decade of the 21st century.

4.1 Strategic alliances: Theological education with new paradigms has been developed thanks to strategic alliances between indigenous evangelical associations with biblical and theological educational institutions, such as the UBL, and ecclesial institutions such as CLAI and MMN. In these alliances a “minga” of students, teaching resources, economic resources, administrative resources, and academic resources has been created.

4.2 Priority of Bible text regarding doctrine: An indigenous friend said, “If through the Bible slavery and fundamentalism entered into our communities, it is with the same Bible that we will achieve liberation.”⁷ Despite having Bible translations in different languages such as Tsáchila, Quichua, Shuar, and Cofán, among others, the Bible that is most used continues being the Reina-Valera version, the New International Version being second. This is due to the capacity of speaking Spanish as a common language, even though, with some exceptions, principally in the Amazon, interpreters in three languages are required.

4.3 Oral methods: The best teaching instrument, in spite of the different didactic techniques learned in different courses, continues to be the oral. Facilitators can spend “hours” speaking without losing the attention of their audience. But this methodology should be filled with anecdotes and life stories.

4.4 Transversality: This theological education has tried to recover, step by step, appreciation for indigenous cosmovision. As well, given the patriarchal system, it has been important to insert topics of gender equality relationships and non-violence.

4.5 New paradigms: The rupture of traditional paradigms has occurred, those which put priority on doctrine about life and dogmatism about the construction of truths. The evangelical paradigm has begun to be replaced by ecumenical and interreligious paradigms, that of “spirit liberation” by holistic liberation, that of exclusivity by inclusivity, that of inequality for equality, that of anthropological by ecological, and that of adrocentric by gender equality. These new paradigms have been inspired in Latin American theologies and other liberal theologies.

4.6 Latin American facilitators: In contrast to the other processes of theological education, these have been facilitated by Latin American personnel,⁸ the majority of them indigenous, especially at the beginner and intermediate level. This has helped to have their own reality as a starting point.

4.7 Intergenerationality: Theological education has not just been for people of all ages, but rather each course or workshop includes, at the same time, people from different generations: youth, young adults, and older adults, which has created trust and produced dialogue between the present and the past.

4.8 Interculturality: This process of theological education has had the presence of different cultures, such as Quichuas, Shuars, and Ashuars.

4.9 Inclusivity: This process has had the presence of people with certain physical challenges such as the blind and some with speech problems.

4.10 Minimal logistical structure: This process has used the resources which are available in each community where the courses and/or workshops are held.

5. Results of theological education

⁷ Quoted from Gerónimo Yantalema in a meeting in what was previously known as CIET.

⁸ The teaching personnel supported initially by MBM and later by MMN have been Latin American, with formation and appreciation for Anabaptist and Latin American theology. The first were Mauricio Chenlo and Sara Padilla between 1992 and 1995, followed by César Moya and Patricia Urueña from 2000 to the present.

To evaluate this theological education developed among indigenous evangelicals in the last two decades, some results can be evidenced:

5.1 The promotion and raising up of social and educational projects which are presumed to be part of the mission of the Church.⁹

5.2 The raising up of leaders with political and administrative capabilities. We emphasize the presence of several former students in decisive political posts, as well as leaders of institutions who encouraged the process of theological education in one moment or another.¹⁰

5.3 Capability of dialogue at a national level. It is worth highlighting the recognition of FEINE as a political interlocutor through different governments.

5.4 The participation of women in the theological process, in the same programs as men, and the openness of some churches to accepting women in pastoral ministry.¹¹

5.5 The bi-vocationalism of certain leaders, to who the study of theology has encouraged them to become prepared for other professions.

5.6 Social and political demands of indigenous evangelicals, who were once considered illiterate and ignorant.

5.7 Openness to ecumenical dialogue due to the incursion in the process of indigenous Baptist, Lutheran, and independent churches, as well as teachers with a historical Protestant origin.

5.8 The insertion in political movements where they have achieved to pass the word from their communities. Theological training offered tools to indigenous evangelicals to insert themselves in the struggles for claims and the promotion of rights of their peoples.

5.9 Social mobility as an expression of being attentive to what is happening in Ecuador, coming to be a priority with respect to worship service or evangelistic activities.

Conclusions and challenges

Theological education among indigenous evangelicals in Ecuador in the past two decades has been possible thanks to the rupture of traditional paradigms which prioritized doctrine regarding life and dogmatism regarding the construction of truths. This effort started to be developed with the participation of people linked to associations of indigenous evangelicals from certain regions, especially in Chimborazo, with the participation of FIUDE and FEINE. These efforts have been accompanied by the UBL, the MMN, and, in the last six years, CLAI, having left certain significant results for the indigenous evangelical peoples.

Even though the process has taken nearly 20 years, it still needs to mature. To achieve this persistence and an indigenous evangelical leadership convinced of the value of these efforts for their communities, churches and the country, is required. Even though encouragement for the formation of indigenous theologians is required, who, from their own contextual experience and cosmovision, are able to make Bible re-readings appropriate to their situation. What is more, persistence and patience in the accompaniment in these process of indigenous theological formation is required given the ups and downs that occur along the way, as much in the economic situation as organizational.

Even though indigenous evangelicals have been formed with a different theological perspective, those who aim for management in organizations are those who have been most resistant to Latin American theological education. The former creates an uncertainty concerning the continuity of the program.

The tension which exists in the needs of training and autonomy of the indigenous ecclesial communities constitutes a challenge for educational processes. Even those from these associate institutions respect is required for native processes, there exists an influence, whether it be in methods or

⁹ We want to emphasize the creation of FIUDE as well as the bilingual intercultural school “Yucanchic Yachai” in the Cebadas Township, Guamote County, province of Chimborazo.

¹⁰ It is important to mention Julián Guamán, who won the Citizens’ Participation Commission’s contest, a regular representative of the State, having presided during an assigned time, as well as Marco Murillo, President of FEINE, and Jerónimo Yantalema, ex-director of FIUDE, assembly people elected by popular vote in the latest elections. It is equally worth emphasizing the nomination, among other councilors, of Humberto Toapanta, youth leader of the indigenous church in Saquisilí, province of Cotopaxi.

¹¹ Manuela Gualán, in Chimborazo, and María Otavalo, in Imbabura, were recognized as pastors less than a year ago, according to information obtained by Pastor Pedro Sisa, interim president of FEINE and president of the National Council of Pastors, as well as Willian Chela, youth coordinator of FEINE.

content. Because of this, accompaniment should be carried out with much good judgment, being sensitive so that the errors of the past are not repeated. But the temptation exists.

Related to the former the recovery of values and ancestral traditions which have been and are being lost from generation to generation is principally due to urban migration. These have happened, on one side, for the inability to access land, and on the other hand, because of economies which exclude and marginalize.

The tension that exists between educating theologically with methods and contents which do and do not exist in their culture should be recognized. These last ones are conducive to the eradication and the longing of more training, as well as the desire to live like *mestizos*. This tension is strengthened with the globalization of technology which has been brought to the most hidden corners of indigenous communities.

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